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ABSTRACT

An evaluation of the Seniors Teaching Seniors project conducted at the Columbia University Brookdale Institute on Aging showed that the demonstration program was regarded favorably by those who had participated in it. The project recruited 40 senior citizens who were interested in teaching a course at their senior centers and gave them 8 weeks of training in teaching methods, the psychology of aging, and group leadership skills. The course was conducted as a demonstration of how to structure and teach lessons, as well as how to develop other skills needed to organize local programs. The participants were divided into two groups, distinguished by whether or not they had had instructional experience in the past. Those with prior experience tended to have been white collar or professional workers, while those with no previous experience often came from clerical or service occupations. A survey was developed and administered to the participants before and after the course to determine their perceptions of the value of the work. All participants reacted favorably to the course. The prior-experience group reported most often that the course had given them specific teaching skills, while the nonprior-experience group commented that the course had increased their self-confidence in pedagogy. Followup data showed that 82 percent of the participants had succeeded in getting a position teaching a course within 5 months of the completion of the program. (KC)

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THE EFFICACY OF A SELF HELP LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM FOR OLDER ADULTS

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THE EFFICACY OF A SELF HELP LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM FOR OLDER ADULTS

Introduction

The traditional stereotype of older people as inherently uneducable has ultimately fallen into disrepute. Research confirms that old people can learn and that the process of learning can be carried out in an effective manner (Eklund, 1969; Vermilye, 1976). Increasing numbers of creatively designed educational programs for the postretirement years have emerged and been operational during the last two decades. Designated as programs of life long learning, older adult education, continuing education, life cycle learning, remedial training, and the like, these curricula projects have however, emphasized the transmittal of traditional substantive content on a myriad of topics. They may be based in either college and university settings or situated in community agencies. More often than not, in these programs, the older person is the recipient of educational programming rather than a provider.

In the Report of the Mini-Conference on Life-Long Learning for Self Sufficiency (1981) the argument is made that life long learning programs have too often been entrenched in traditional content and method. That is, they largely confine their classroom offerings to the study of special interest, academic subjects (i.e., psychology, history, art, drama, etc.) with the aim of simply obtaining a degree or else emphasize the communication of

information as primarily a recreational activity (i.e., classes in gardening, exercise, music appreciation, reading, etc.). Indeed, this was the trend in education and aging throughout the 1970's. The focus was clearly toward self-enrichment or self-fulfillment among older learners rather than self-sufficiency. The literature is rich in descriptive accounts of this category of educational programming (Academy for Educational Development, 1974). Some of these programs did utilize older persons in the role of teacher and resource to other older adults (Hirsch, 1978; Hirsch, 1980; Murphy and Florio, 1978; Bowles, 1976) however these reports tend not to include research statements of the efficacy of this strategy and perhaps of greater significance appear to largely utilize older people already prepared for and comfortable with assuming the teaching function. Programs of teaching skills acquisition, on the other hand appear to be rare.

This paper reports on the first year experience of a university-based, teacher training and leadership development program which aimed to respond to several gaps in our knowledge of education and aging. Specifically, the intent of the "Seniors-Teaching-Seniors" training program was to:

1. empirically test the efficacy of a training program for older adults not yet fully versed in the skills of group leadership and teaching; and
2. provide a working example of older adult educational programming geared toward promoting self-sufficiency rather than solely self-enrichment of the older learner.

This paper presents findings reflecting the extent to which older learners perceived themselves able to acquire a series of basic leadership and teaching skills over a relatively short period of time. As such, data also serve to guage the relative effectiveness of skills training programming which does not rely solely on preparation in the traditional domain of topical or special interest instruction.

The Seniors-Teaching-Seniors Program

The Seniors Teaching Seniors training program is based on the premise that there are increasing numbers of active and well elderly entering an extended period of retirement with a desire to transmit their professional and avocational skills to others (Stuen, Spencer and Raines, 1982). Often this may include aspirations to assume teaching roles in local community senior centers. These leadership urges are, however, often thwarted by the older person's experience in functioning as a teacher or group leader coupled with their tendency to occupy marginal positions in the service network of the senior citizens center.

In order to address these deficits a training model was designed reflecting the theory and practice of adult education. The program departed from conventional approaches to lifelong learning however, through its emphasis on satisfying the self-directed learning goals of prospective teachers, leaders and organizers of educational programs for the elderly. The project

also considered the issue of preparing senior centers to accept older adults as valued teaching resources.

During the late winter and early spring of 1982 an eight full day session course module was offered to 40 older adults each affiliated with a senior center in New York City. The project, conceived and developed by the Brookdale Institute on Aging and Adult Human Development at Columbia University, engaged a multidisciplinary faculty comprised of instructors in the areas of adult education, social work, library service, history and the media. The eight week module emphasized curricula content in the areas of:

1. pedagogical skills acquisition;
2. group dynamics;
3. the psychosocial condition of aging, and
4. topical or special interest instruction.

Pedagogical content in the first three areas was presented exclusively in five of the eight sessions comprising the module though reference to teaching technique and strategy was necessarily emphasized throughout the program. The theory and practice of course design, developing lesson plans and managing a class were among the critical skills specifically taught to the older learners.

Students were also versed in the skills of working with groups and the principles inherent in the normal aging process. Included here was instruction in motivational technique in group situations, public speaking, communication methods, and the psychological,

sociological and biological aspects of creative, normal aging.

The fourth area of curricula content was that of topical instruction. At first glance, this would appear to represent a return to the tradition of special interest presentations on topics of personal student concern. In fact, the subjects taught during the training period (nutrition, current events, use of libraries) served as content areas wherein course design and teaching process could be applied. Thus not only were the key issues and pertinent literature on a subject addressed but applicable teaching methods as well.

The Survey Design

The assessment procedures utilized during the course of the Seniors Teaching Seniors training project were based on the assumption that program success could not be objectively determined by those individuals administering or teaching the course. Rather, project efficacy would best be documented by the perceptions and actions of the older learners themselves. Specifically, the following indicators of efficacy were considered:

a. project enrollment retention rates;

b. student self-assessments of teaching capacity and program quality; and

c. student success in securing teaching positions after training.

Pre-program (before-T1) and post-program (after-T2) student assessment instruments were developed specifically for this project. The questionnaires gathered information on the personal backgrounds of the older learners (i.e., age, education, race/ethnicity and occupational status), their involvement in senior center activities, specific teaching interests, self-perceptions of teaching skills before and after training and student judgements of the relative helpfulness of the various elements of the training module. The questionnaire was group administered in a classroom situation immediately prior to the first session of the program and immediately after the concluding session. Facilitators were utilized during each administration. They read aloud individual questions and response choices and provided necessary assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

In order to limit the size of class enrollment and encourage individual participation, the training module was divided into two concurrent 8-session sequences. This allowed for the grouping of older learners into "advanced" students having some prior experience in group leadership roles and "beginner" group students with no prior experience in group leadership roles. Questionnaire data were successfully obtained from 17 (89%) of the advanced group enrollees and 18 (100%) of the beginner group enrollees.

Profiles of Training Program Enrollees

Table 1 summarizes data on the socio-demographic characteristics of Seniors Teaching Seniors training program participants disaggregated by class category. Differences between student groups were most pronounced for the variables of ethnicity and educational achievement. Whites comprised 70.6 percent of the advanced class and only 44.4 percent of the beginner class. A clear majority of the advanced class (58.8%) had received a college or graduate school education whereas only 22.3 percent of the beginner class had gone as far in their educational training. Approximately three quarters of each group were female with the majority of enrollees reporting that they lived alone. The mean age of the older learners was 69.1 years with students in the advanced class approximately 3 years older on the average than their beginner counterparts. Students ranged in age from 55 to 85 years. Analysis of the students' former professions confirmed that members of the advanced class were considerably more likely to have held white collar, professional positions (e.g., teachers, social workers, lawyers) whereas beginner trainees had more frequently been associated with prior employment in service, clerical and retail positions.

Teaching Effectiveness and Program Quality

A series of 11 specific teaching capacity items were included in the T1 and T2 program assessment questionnaires. They were

TABLE 1

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SENIORS-TEACHING-SENIORS TRAINING PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS BY CLASS CATEGORY

Socio-Demographic Characteristic	Advanced Class (N=17) No.	%	Beginner Class (N=18) No.	%	Total (N=35) No.	%
Age (mean years)	70.7		67.6		69.1	
Sex						
Male	4	23.5	5	27.8	9	25.7
Female	13	76.5	13	72.2	26	74.3
Total	17	100.0	18	100.0	35	100.0
Ethnicity/Race						
Nonwhite	5	29.4	10	55.6	15	42.9
White	12	70.6	8	44.4	20	57.1
Total	17	100.0	18	100.0	35	100.0
Education						
High School or Less	2	11.8	7	38.9	9	25.7
Some College	5	29.4	7	38.9	12	34.3
College	6	35.3	3	16.7	9	25.7
Graduate School	4	23.5	1	5.6	5	14.3
Total	17	100.0	18	100.0	35	100.0
Household Composition						
Lives Alone	10	58.8	13	72.2	23	65.7
Lives with Spouse	5	29.4	4	22.2	9	25.7
Lives with Other(s)	2	11.8	1	5.6	3	8.6
Total	17	100.0	18	100.0	35	100.0

designed to guage the self-perceived ability of the older learner in assuming the teaching or group leadership function (score metric range: 1=not at all to 4=very well). Students were questioned concerning the extent they felt they could:

1. speak clearly and comfortably before a group;
2. share knowledge of a subject area with other people;
3. interest others in a subject to be taught;
4. effectively teach a group of older people;
5. help others reach a better understanding about normal aging;
6. develop and follow a lesson plan;
7. keep accurate attendance records;
8. use the community's resources in gathering class material;
9. use the community's resources for self study and improvement;
10. develop a course outline for a class to be taught; and
11. teach a series of one hour classes on a subject.

The 11-item "Senior Teaching Capacity" index outlined above proved to be highly reliable. Cronbach standardized item alphas (measures of internal consistency) were computed at .86 and .90 at T1 and T2 respectively. Inter-item correlation coefficients ranged from .08 to .79 before training and from .06 to .94 subsequent to the training sequence.

The older students were also presented with a generalized probe as to their self-perceived qualifications to teach (i.e., "How

qualified do you now feel to teach the subject of greatest interest to you?). A 5-point Likert-type response series was attached to this question and it was presented at T1 and T2.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics by class category for the generalized or global teaching qualification probe. Tables' 3 and 4 summarize pre-program and post-program responses to the items on the "Senior Teaching Capacity" Index. Table 2 confirms that advanced class students entered the training program with considerably higher levels of confidence in their overall qualifications to teach (mean=3.86; S.D.=.77) as compared to members of the beginner class (mean=2.76; S.D.=1.09). Data obtained at T2, however, document significantly greater enhancement of generalized teaching qualification among the beginner group. In fact, their mean score at T2 reflects almost a 28 percent increase over the T1 measure, a difference which proved to be statistically significant (t=-2.42; p=.028). On the other hand, advanced class members recorded a mean increase of .21 on this measure (a 5.4% change) which was not statistically significant. It may be said that advanced students entered the program with considerable confidence in their overall capacity to teach. The training sequence succeeded in strengthening or slightly bolstering their already high teaching confidence levels. On the other hand, beginners emerged from the sequence with more dramatic increments in their personal self-confidence and views of teaching competency, having entered the program with a lesser sense of their own abilities.

TABLE 2

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SELF QUALIFICATION TO TEACH BEFORE AND AFTER TRAINING PROGRAM BY CLASS CATEGORY

Class Category	Before Program (T1) Mean	S.D.	After Program (T2) Mean	S.D.	Mean Difference	T-Value Probability
Advanced	3.86	.77	4.07	.83	.21	-1.00 .336
Beginner	2.76	1.09	3.53	.87	.76	-2.42 .028*
Total	3.26	1.09	3.77	.88	.51	-2.56 .016*

Possible score range 1-5: where 1=not qualified at all; 2=not very qualified; 3=moderately qualified; 4=very qualified; and 5=extremely qualified.

*Statistically significant.

TABLE 3

PRE AND POST PROGRAM DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS
FOR SENIOR TEACHING CAPACITY INDEX BY CLASS CATEGORY

Class Category	Pre Program (Before-T1) Mean	S.D.	Post Program (After-T2) Mean	S.D.	Mean Difference	T-Value Probability
Advanced	34.88	5.89	39.59	3.46	4.71	3.65 .002*
Beginner	34.62	6.26	35.75	5.76	1.12	1.00 .332
Total	34.76	5.98	37.73	5.03	2.97	3.29 .002*

*Statistically significant.

TABLE 4

PRE AND POST PROGRAM DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS
FOR ITEMS ON THE SENIOR TEACHING CAPACITY INDEX

Senior Teaching Capacity Index Item	Pre Program (Before-T1) Mean	S.D.	Post Program (After-T2) Mean	S.D.	Mean Difference	T-Value
1. Speak clearly and comfortably before a group.	3.29	.71	3.31	.53	.03	0.27
2. Share knowledge of a subject area with other people.	3.50	.66	3.50	.51	.00	0.00
3. Interest students in a subject to be taught.	3.26	.89	3.46	.51	.20	1.48
4. Effectively teach a group of older people.	3.20	.83	3.34	.68	.14	0.87
5. Help others reach a better understanding about normal aging.	2.76	1.00	3.24	.79	.48	2.87**
6. Develop and follow a lesson plan.	3.00	.92	3.35	.77	.35	2.10*
7. Keep accurate attendance records.	3.73	.52	3.67	.59	-.06	-0.70
8. Use the community's resources in gathering class material.	3.06	.95	3.38	.89	.32	1.82
9. Use the community's resources for self study and improvement.	3.00	.92	3.41	.89	.41	2.12*
10. Develop a course outline for a class to be taught.	2.85	.91	3.45	.62	.61	4.03***
11. Teach a series of 1 hour classes on a subject of choice.	3.09	.84	3.39	.66	.30	1.77
Summary Index Score	34.76	5.98	37.73	5.03	2.97	3.29***

Score metrics: 1-4; where 1=not at all; 2=not very well; 3=moderately well; and 4=very well.
Index range: 11-44; where a higher score indicates greater student perceived capacity.

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.005

It is worthy of note that a positive association ($r=.48$; $p=.003$) was found between a student's sense of overall teaching competence and their frequency of involvement in planning activities at their affiliated senior center. Those who more often engaged in the planning function were more likely to express increased confidence in their qualification to teach. No such association appeared between teaching competence and involvement in other senior center tasks such as helping with recreational programming, clerical functions, preparing and/or serving lunch, or even holding office.

Whereas beginner students registered more consistent gains in teaching confidence it is important to note that advanced students emerged from the project with greater enhancement of specific teaching skills as measured by the "Senior Teaching Capacity" Index. Table 3 confirms that the Seniors Teaching Seniors class as a whole left the program with significant self-perceived enhancement of specific skills. Data reflect a change in the mean Senior Teaching Capacity Index score from 34.76 (S.D.=5.98) at T1 to 37.73 (S.D.=5.03) at T2 ($t=3.29$; $p<.005$). Further inquiry indicated, however, that these significant gains were the result of measurably greater perceived skills acquisition by advanced class members as opposed to beginner students. In fact, both categories of students entered into the program with approximately equivalent levels of self-perceived teaching capacity but at the end of the 8 week sequence advanced students were clearly

more able to define a circumscribed set of skills which had been significantly enhanced.

Table 4 separates out those specific teaching skills that the older students found were particularly enhanced. As shown, perceived teaching capacity increased between T1 and T2 on 9 of the 11 index items. Significant change was recorded in the area of group and aging dynamics (Item 5 - helping others reach a better understanding about normal aging), pedagogical skills (Item 6 - developing and following a lesson plan and Item 10 - developing a course outline), and topical or special interest instruction (Item 9 - using community resources for self study and improvement). A separate analysis of data, disaggregated by class category, confirmed that advanced class students registered significant increments in perceived capacity on each of the items noted above as well as on Item 8 (using community resources in gathering class material) and borderline significant change on Item 11 (teaching a series of 1 hour classes on a subject of choice). Beginner students saw significant improvement of specific skills in the area of developing course outlines only (Item 10). One may speculate from these data that a brief but intensive teacher training program is more likely to instill a measure of confidence in the beginning group leader and better succeed in building specific skills capability in that individual who comes to the program with a more developed sense of self-assurance.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are several additional indicators which serve to reinforce the contention that older adult learners can be drawn to, remain in and emerge with newfound skills from a program of leadership training which deemphasizes the traditional merits of preparation in a substantive area. Of 40 older adults who registered for the program, 37 or 92.5 percent successfully completed the training module. Overall student reaction to the program was good or excellent with almost unanimous agreement that those sessions which emphasized the acquisition of teaching skills would prove to be most helpful in their pursuit of teaching and group leadership positions. Both the advanced and beginner students concurred on this issue. Furthermore, over 80 percent of the members of each class desired a continuation of the program at some later date. Interestingly, beginning students more frequently advocated for extending the sessions as they were currently designed presumably with the hope of more effectively internalizing specific pedagogical skills. On the other hand, advanced members, who had more quickly completed the process of skills enhancement, were less likely to call for prolonged periods of training. Follow up data on student experience in actually securing teaching positions within their affiliate centers reflects that 82 percent of the graduating class succeeded (within a 4-5 month period) after program completion.

This paper has actually addressed only the first phase of a two-staged assessment of program efficacy and teaching skills acquisition among older adult learners. Whether program graduates are able to successfully maintain their newfound teaching role in their respective senior centers over time and the extent to which their efforts are well received by center administration and membership may be the ultimate litmus test of the "Seniors Teaching Seniors" concept. Indeed, the very name given to the program is a reminder that these questions of broader impact must be answered. Preliminary data on senior center course initiation rates and responses by center membership have been positive based on the criteria of growth in class size and continuity of course offerings.

The intent remains to collect impact data on those individuals who represent indirect beneficiaries of the teaching training program - i.e., senior center members who enroll in classes and discussion groups taught by program graduates and senior center directors who have traditionally struggled with inadequate staffing of center programs. Positive data obtained from these groups would serve to further confirm the value of teacher training initiatives of this type.

In conclusion, preliminary data suggest that programs of adult education and life-long learning need not confine their agenda to the presentation of substantive or topical materials. With proper planning and explanation, projects which emphasize the

acquisition of less tangible, pedagogical and leadership skills can succeed and in fact come to be preferred by older adult retirees. The "Seniors-Teaching-Seniors" idea apparently can serve two purposes--a confidence-building function for the neophyte group leader and a skills-building function for the individual with some experience in teaching. Regardless of focus, this type of educational programming recognizes the rich experiences and well developed subject expertise that retired people have amassed through the course of their lives.

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